

Shedding some light on the history, language and literature of the Lepchas

THE EARLIEST PRINTED BOOKS IN LEPCHA

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I. Start and Niebel : Bible translation (1845-74)

In two years' time Lepchas everywhere will be able to take pride in the distinction of having had their language in print for 150 years; and Christian Lepchas, in particular, will have the added satisfaction of knowing that it was some of the Books of The Bible that were the first to be printed in Lepcha; I am referring here to printing with movable types, first invented in the middle of the 15th century; but if we include lithography, printing from drawings on soft stone (invented about 1799), then the date for the 150th anniversary has already passed; for the first entry under the heading 'Lepcha' in the library catalogue of the British and Foreign Bible Society, London, is:

'[1845 (St. Matthew's Gospel Calcutta? 1845]. Some years before 1845 a mission had been begun by W. Start, formerly an Anglican Clergyman, a [t] Darjiling, in the hope of evangelizing the Lepchas, Bhutias, and Nepalese of the neighbourhood. W. Start translated a few books with the help of [C.G] Niebel, one of the original members of the Moravian Mission to Darjiling and had them printed at his own expense. The earliest publication was this lithographed edition of St. Matthew's Gospel. 6321'.

When I asked to see this remarkable book, the Library Assistant at Bible House (London) explained to me that the square brackets enclosing this first entry in the Lepcha section of the Catalogue meant that the Society did not possess a copy but knew that it had been published.

Since the library at Bible House is a highly comprehensive collection of religious books, we must fear that there are now no copies of this, the first Lepcha printed book, in existence. In that case we must return to 1999 as the year in which to commemorate the first book to be printed in Lepcha by using movable types; and this book is also probably the oldest Lepcha printed book to have survived to the present day. The entry in the Library's Catalogue reads:

'1849— The Book of Genesis and part of Exodus in Lepshá'. Baptist Mission Press: Calcutta. 1849—translated by [C.G] Niebel—6322.' ['Printed by J. Thomas at the Baptist Mission Press.

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1849'] (we know from Surgeon D.F. Rennie's book "Bhotan and the story of the Dooar War" (1866/1970,367) that Niebel was, in fact, a Baptist; so the Bible House Library Catalogue was mistaken in referring to him as a Moravian). This book marks the beginning of an era in Lepcha book production; so I have thought it worthwhile to give the title page and the first page of the text in facsimile.

The corresponding English text of verses 1-7 of this page of Niebel's translation into Lepcha is as follows (I have given it as it appears in the 'Authorized Version of the Holy Bible', sometimes referred to as the 'King James Version', which dates from the reign of King James I of England (1603-25), because that was the only English translation that would have been available to Start and Niebel; 'A Revised Version' was not published until 1881, for the New Testament, and 1885, for the Old Testament, by which time Niebel had died):

Genesis Chapter 1

1. In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.
2. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.
3. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.
4. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness.
5. And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day.
6. And God said, let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters.
7. And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament: and it was so.

Though it was Niebel alone who translated 'Genesis and part of Exodus' into Lepcha, he and Start co-operated in translating and publishing a second Gospel in that same year, 1849, namely 'St. John's Gospel'; and 1849 was also the year in which they printed a revised

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མཆོད་པུ་ལུ་

ཧེ་ཅེ་ལུ་ རྒྱུ་ རྒྱུ་ ལུ་ ལུ་

THE BOOK

OF

GENESIS

AND

PART OF EXODUS

IN

LEPCHA.

CALCUTTA:

PRINTED BY J. THOMAS, AT THE BAPTIST MISSION PRESS.

1849.

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edition of 'St. Matthew', probably in Calcutta, in which case it would have been printed at the Baptist Mission Press using J. Thomas's newly cast Lepcha fount.

The Rev. Mr. Start, who had first come to Darjeeling in 1841, and ‘at once, with the view of forming a mission, started making a limited collection of Lepcha words’, was forced by ill health to leave Tukvar, near Darjeeling, in 1852, and return to England; but his assistant Niebel remained in Darjeeling until his death, from dysentery, in 1865; and his tombstone is to be seen in the old cemetery in Darjeeling. He had been in the Darjeeling area since 1843.

Start and Niebel were, thus, the first foreigners to translate books from English into Lepcha, namely the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and John, two of which, as we have already seen, were published during the period 1845-9; two Bible Books were also re-printed after Niebel's death, 'The Gospel of John, in Lepcha', in 1872, and 'The Book of Genesis and part of Exodus in Lepshá', in 1874.

II. A weakness in the Baptist Mission Press's fount

Though, at first sight, the Lepcha fount gives the impression of being admirably clear and a credit to J. Thomas's skill as a type designer, there is one respect in which I feel that it is inferior to the traditional hand-written form of the Lepcha letters. My criticism has to do with the Lepcha letters for the two vowels o and á. In hand-written Lepcha the letters for these two vowels are different: the letter á is distinguished from the letter o by a little hook running down from the head of the letter to the right, or, for some writers, by a bent shape as against a slightly curved shape, by [^] for á as against [|] for o, or by [<] for á as against ⁽ for o; so that 'á-bo 'father', for example, is written either [^][|] ^o or [<][|] ^o; but in the printed style devised for Lepcha by J. Thomas of the Baptist Mission Press, 1849, the letters for á and o have exactly the same shape, ⁽ , with the result that á-bo is printed as [&]⁽^o . This means that in printing the only difference between the two is that for o the letter comes before its 'á-kup letter and for á it comes after its 'á-kup letter; the difference is purely a matter of position.

In words like ʒ(ʌ) and ʒ(ʌ) ('á-bo, 'á-mo, 'father', 'mother'),

it is easy to see that the first (belongs to the first syllable, á, while the second (belongs to the second syllable, bo or mo; but where the letter occurs only once, it is sometimes difficult to know whether it is á, belonging to the first syllable, or o belonging to the second syllable. For example the fifth word on line 2 of the 'Genesis' text above (verse 2), á-ta could be read as either 'á-ta' or 'á-to'; so unless you know enough Lepcha to be able to guess from the context which is the correct alternative, you are just as likely to read it wrong as to read it right.

Similarly, one might be tempted to read á-ko rather than 'a-ka 'hand'; or, the other way round, one might, mistakenly, read á-ko 'five' as fá-nga; yet there is no need for this difficulty; J. Thomas could just as easily have followed the hand-written Lepcha letter shapes, and devised different shapes for á and o.

III. Mainwaring: Grammar and Dictionary (1876, 1898)

A. The Grammar (1876)

Two years after the reprint of Niebel's 'The Book of Genesis and part of Exodus in Lepsha' (1874) Col. G.B. Mainwaring's 'A Grammar of the Róng (Lepcha) Language' (1876, printed by C.B. Lewis). Apart from the weakness in the Baptist Mission Press's Lepcha fount and that I have criticized in section II above I consider that the scholarly Colonel was indeed fortunate in having a well designed fount of Lepcha letters ready for him to use, supported by 28 years' experience of printing Lepcha at the Baptist Mission Press, Calcutta.

B. The Dictionary (Berlin, 1898)

In the manuscript of his other book too, 'Dictionary of the Lepcha-language', Mainwaring had written the Lepcha entries in the Lepcha script as well as transcribing them into Roman letters; but its editor, A. Grunwedel, was not permitted to print the Lepcha script. In the Preface he has written: 'When the manuscripts of the late General Mainwaring were entrusted to the editor it was desired by the British Government, that the type used should be Roman. "The so-called Lepcha alphabet used by General Mainwaring in his Grammar is a

pure fiction. The language has properly speaking no written character, though it is possible that on a few occasions a debased variety of the Tibetan character may have been resorted to. There is however no necessity whatever and no real justification for incurring the expense of starting Lepcha type nor as a matter of fact can a complete fount of such type be constructed" (ix). In view of this ill-informed prohibition by the British Government the most that Grunwedel could do to follow the author's wishes was to illustrate the 55 letters of the Lepcha script, in both their printed and their written type (x; with corresponding Tibetan letters, for comparison, in both the U-med and the U-can styles), followed by two pages of hand-written Lepcha in facsimile from the Berlin manuscript of the ta-she sung.

IV. Dyongshi Sada: a catechism and a Gospel (1903, 1908)

Early in the next century there came an addition to the two Gospels that had already been published, Matthew and John. The reference to this third Gospel translation in the Bible House library catalogue reads as follows:

'1908 The Gospel of Luke in Lepcha----- Translated by Dyongshi, a Lepcha pastor, and other Lepchas, under the supervision of J.A. Graham and D. Macdonald' (It was re-printed in Bangalore in 1953).

Although his name is not mentioned in the references to it in the Bible House library catalogue, it seems to me very probable that róng-sa á-vyet á-dun (the Rong Lepcha catechism), published by the Baptist Mission Press, Calcutta, for the Church of Scotland Eastern Himalayan Mission (1903), was also the work of Dyongshi Sada.

In any case the Rev. Mr. Dyongshi Sada is the first Lepcha to be recognized as a translator into Lepcha. I personally take pride in the knowledge that my grandfather-in-law David Macdonald was associated with him in that work.